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ABSTRACT

A qualitative case study explored the adult learner experience of pursuing an applied management degree in an accelerated degree completion program at a liberal arts institution. These three areas of research informed this study: intensity and time involvement of course learning; collegiate-based, time-compressed, intensive course formats; and accelerated degree programs. Purposeful sampling was used to select 20 participants; data were collected onsite through taped interviews. Findings indicated that students in this accelerated adult degree program characterized their learning through these four key elements that influenced their experience: a supportive world of structure and components of the program; the quasi-family relationships with fellow students; the beliefs of a specific student identity for effective learning and successful completion; and paradoxical students' beliefs about their engagement in successful learning. The students identified these elements of the program that were proactive in keeping them in the program and pushing toward degree completion: handling the pressure of accelerated learning in an accelerated life; viewing themselves in relation to their social world; and understanding their sense of learning. (Contains 19 references.) (YLB)

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ACCELERATED DEGREE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LEARNERS, PROGRAMS, AND POLICY
AERA 2001 SYMPOSIUM

A CASE STUDY OF ADULT LEARNER EXPERIENCES OF AN ACCELERATED DEGREE PROGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, there have been a significant number of program innovations directed to adult learners in higher education. One of the predominant innovations has been the development of accelerated degree programs. Created to meet adult learner needs for convenience, access, and relevancy, these accelerated degree offerings represent "fast-tracking" credential options for part-time adult undergraduates. Typically, these accelerated degree programs are offered by private four-year colleges and represent professional areas of study, redesigned curricular formats, cohort learning models, and compressed time schedule of one course offering during a 4-6 week period. Although there are no current figures regarding numbers of accelerated degree programs, a 1995 survey study regarding adult programs, policies and services (Kasworm, 1995) found that 35% (approximately 300 institutions) of the responding 850 four-year institutions noted their use of accelerated degree programs for adult students. These institutions also reported their use of other innovative options: 56%--off campus offerings, 53%--weekend offerings, 35%--early morning offerings, 84%-- evening offerings, 27%--telecommunications options, and 34%--correspondence offerings. Recent anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been an exponential increase in both numbers of accelerated degree programs and in the numbers of institutions offering this unique instructional format.

Accelerated formats for learning have been crafted with the assumption that adults require and can respond to an abbreviated time frame for a course learning process. These

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formats also have implicitly suggested that adults, because of prior life experiences and because of relevancy of coursework to their current lives, can learn and demonstrate proficiency in a shorter-period of time. At the heart of current debate regarding the efficacy of accelerated formats is the nature of this different format, the focal point of curricula [that of integration of studies of current work life experiences] and the shortened trajectory of learning engagement per course. This paper will provide background literature on previous examinations of varied ways of considering accelerated learning and accelerated learning curricula. This current study will present the emic perspective of adult learners engaged in an accelerated degree program. Looking at the intersubjective experiences of these individuals in a unique context will illuminate our understandings of the adult perspective learning within an accelerated degree program. Lastly, I will suggest key elements for reframing our understanding of undergraduate learning engagement through the theory of situated learning.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Three areas of research have informed this current exploration of accelerated degree learning experiences and the related tacit assumptions regarding accelerated formats and adult learning. The first area considers intensity and time involvement of course learning; the second considers studies of collegiate based time-compressed, intensive course formats; and the third examines specific research studies on accelerated degree programs.

Intensity of time involvement in course learning

Historically, there have been lay person and practitioner assumptions of the necessity for significant time commitments for creating effective learning environments and subsequent learning outcomes. From the arena of K-12 education research, there have been a significant number of studies examining the importance of learning through "time-on-task," suggesting that the more "focused" time and expectations on learning tasks, the more learning occurs (Wittrock, 1985). This research has focused both upon student's attention and timed efforts, as well as instructors' time allocations in their class instructional process. In research studies on higher education reported by Scott and Conrad (Scott & Conrad, 1991), Karweit(Karweit, 1984), and Walberg(Walberg, 1988), the dominant findings has suggested that there were no differences in outcomes between intensive and traditional courses across formats and degrees of intensity.

Time, as it relates to intensity, appeared to have relatively little influence on educational outcomes when it was considered in isolation.

However, the beliefs of the relationship of time to learning are still present in current frames of higher education research. As a leading exemplar of these current beliefs, Astin's Theory of Involvement(Astin, 1985) suggests that involvement reflects both a quantitative (time and numbers of activities) and qualitative (relative intensity, duration, immersion) dimensions of both physical and psychological dimensions. In his initial postulates of this theory he notes:

> Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in, say, academic work can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (does the student review and comprehend reading assignments, or does the student simply stare at the textbook and daydream?)
>
> The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. (Astin, 1985, p.136)

These postulates are believed to be directly supportive of student persistence and college degree completion as well as directly impact student satisfaction with collegiate involvement. Although numerous studies have suggested that time does not necessarily influence learning, there continues to be a cultural and theoretical belief that time involvement does make a different for higher education undergraduate success and degree completion.

Attitudes and outcomes of intensive course formats

The second arena of research examined the descriptive development, as well as the attitudes and outcomes from time-compressed, intensive course formats in colleges and universities. This research and critique considered intensive formats through the historical development of curricular formats in higher education, and of research studies of intensive learning formats (summer, interim, modular, regular term, and weekend), related examination of discipline studies in intensive course formats, and related studies of the long-term learning

effects. These examinations also considered student and faculty attitudes regarding different types of intensive formats. The primary review and critical discussion of this literature comes from the work of Scott and Conrad (Scott & Conrad, 1991; Scott & Conrad, 1992). They noted the importance of examining intensive courses because of the dramatic growth of these curricular and learning forms based in collegiate efforts to serve the adult and part-time student. Also, they noted a vocal criticism by faculty and administration that intensive courses are "too compressed 'to produce anything of education value' Slichter in (Schoenfeld, 1967, p. 160). These efforts to utilize intensive courses has been criticized for lack of breath, diluting academic standards and forcing students to cram for information, thus lessening the possibilities of learning and development (Scott & Conrad, 1992, p.411).

This Scott and Conrad critique presented six conclusions from their examination of intensive course research. Their findings noted: 1) intensive courses present equivalent--and sometimes superior--learning outcomes in comparison to traditional length courses; 2) certain disciplines and fields of study (social sciences and humanities) presented outcomes favoring intensive over traditional formats; 3) students were generally supportive of intensive courses and appreciative of its convenience and efficiency; 4) faculty attitudes were the most significant obstacle to intensive courses; 5) time was not the principal driving force regarding learning (when time was isolated as a variable; however, when time was in concert with other factors, it may be consequential for student learning); and 6) concentrated, in-depth experiences do facilitate student development in ways not yet understood. This analysis suggested that "students were often motivated, excited, and inspired by intensive course experiences and that concentrated learning generated a level of satisfaction unlike that experienced in traditional-length courses (p. 444)."

Examinations of accelerated degree programs

There has been limited research examining the experience and impact of accelerated degree programs on adult learning. Most of this empirical research has examined accelerated degree adult student performance. One study of undergraduate business students (Jonas & Weimer, June, 1999) examined comparative scores on the major ETS field achievement test of business student, as well as the national norms. It also conducted a comparison of grades between traditional programs and non-traditional accelerated adult degree programs at five

institutions. Considering matched pairs of traditional/non-traditional students, nontraditional accelerated business program students did well, if not better than traditional students in business programs at the same institutions did. The Clark study (Clark, June, 1997) examined an accelerated combined RN and MSN program at the University of San Diego using a discrepancy evaluation model. Individuals participated in this combined program were compared against two other groups, that of a regular RSN program graduates and a group of prior baccalaureate graduates returning to the master's program. On the basis of two measures of student performance, that of composite scores of GPA's on the final four graduate courses and of exiting GPA's, students in all three groups had comparable performance. A more recent study considered learning outcomes and attitudes of adults in accelerated courses across three private colleges, as well as comparative learning attitudes between younger and adult students. In this study (Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999), the researchers examined: 1) end-of-course surveys in six accelerated courses (5 or 8 weeks in length), 2) a survey of alumni regarding satisfaction one (1) or two (2) years after completing their degrees, 3) an examination of content mastery and performance-based assessments, and 4) a comparison of learning and attitudes between young students enrolled in 16 week courses and of adult students in 5 week versions of the same courses. Based in the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching and indicators of instructional quality, students offered comparative responses of end-of-course surveys with no significant differences in all, and alumni offered a strong to reasonably strong agreement with the importance of motivation and effective instruction and materials. Assessments of content and performance mastery as conducted by faculty panels noted that "students in these accelerated courses were performing more than satisfactorily at college level work (p.14)." In a comparative examination of the relationship between time in class and length of course on adult student learning (between traditional and accelerated versions), there were no significant trends in performance scores favoring either format. There also were no statistically significant differences between the average performance scores for any course for any dimensions of performance.

One other study should also be noted. In this study of the early beginnings of accelerated degrees programs, attitudes of professional school admissions deans toward accelerated undergraduate degree were surveyed (Smith & Kublik, January, 1976). Admissions deans

expressed beliefs that they would view candidates from accelerated degree programs less favorably due to the time-shortened mechanisms.

Given this review of past literature, both researchers and practitioners lack a strong grounding for understanding and evaluating accelerated learning experiences. In particular, there is need for studies which consider the unique adult life experiences and current life contexts as integral to the learning experiences within an accelerated adult degree program. This current study focuses upon this need and considered the complexity of adult lives and the relationship of adult experiences in an accelerated degree program. The research inquiry desires to understand the adult perspective of an intensive set of learning experiences and the unique context relationship through an accelerated degree program. The framework for this research is the theory of situated learning, which considers both the social and psychological aspects of adult learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This framework presumes that there are a number of important understandings and experiences that influence adult learning. One key area is the social world of the learner, including work, other life experiences, and the specific learning environment of faculty, students, program structure, and program mission. The second key area is the psychological realm of the learner, including prior learning experiences, motivation, expectations for specific learning outcomes, as well as the actual experiences of engagement in the learning process. Because of both the complexity of this framework and the lack of prior research in this area, this study is based in an exploratory qualitative case study exploring the meanings, perspectives, and experiences of a group of adult learners participating in an accelerated adult degree program.

RESEARCH CASE STUDY

This qualitative case study explored the adult learner experience of pursuing an applied management degree in an accelerated degree completion program at a liberal arts institution. The research was part of a larger study examining the adult undergraduate experience of engagement and involvement in undergraduate education and had included five other institutional contexts, in addition to the current examination of an adult degree program at a liberal arts institution (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Purposeful sampling was used to select twenty (20) participants. These interviewed adult students represented a variety of ages, gender,

educational backgrounds, and commuting experiences. In addition, the sampling included different cohort groups who were at various stages of the program, ranging from 6 months of experience of the program to individuals who had completed the accelerated program during the prior two months before the interviews. Data was collected on-site through taped interviews, lasting from 1 to 2 hours. The original study conducted inductive analysis by case study site with a second inductive analysis across sites, generating key themes, and categories. For this current study, an additional secondary examination of the data was conducted to further explore the depth and complexity of experience of these adults in an accelerated degree completion program in relation to the context of an accelerated learning experience.

Findings

Adults in this accelerated adult degree program characterized their learning through the four key elements that influenced their experience. These included: 1) the supportive world of structure and components of the program, 2) the quasi-family relationships with fellow students, 3) the beliefs of a specific student identity for effective learning and successful completion, and 4) paradoxical students' beliefs about their engagement in successful learning.

A supportive world through an accelerated degree program

Adult learners viewed the accelerated degree experience as creating an "adult" environment for learning and successful degree completion. This environment for learning focused on adult learner access, a predictable program structure with preset courses, one course involvement at a time, pre-designated evenings for all course meetings, and a predictable timeline for completion of degree. They also pointed to caring faculty, fellow students, support services, and other related aspects of the program and learning environment offering student support structure.

The program structures *"push you"* to successful completion. These adults believed that the structures and processes of the program predicted success, if the adult would make a personal commitment to the expectations of program. This belief of being in a structure for successful completion was usually based in adults' experiences of prior enrollment in a community college, liberal arts, or university collegiate studies. These adults have experienced

problematic involvements with these other institutions and knew that they would need to make a commitment of 5 to 10 years of part-time involvement in that traditional degree structure. They believed that the accelerated degree program was a valuable alternative. Unlike their prior experiences of ongoing personal and life negotiations to participate and survive through traditional programs, they saw this customized program as offering a predictable, adult-friendly, and supportive environment. The accelerated degree program was seen as locking them into a learning process that held them in place and that "pushed them" to completion.

> It is all black and white. It is all on paper, every course that you take and that you are going to be taking...You have to think very hard in class, but you don't have to think of anything else. People that work don't have time for this other crap that you have to go through at traditional school (referring to the lack of hassles and hoops through the accelerated degree program).

> Part of the curriculum is knowing that it's tough (time compressed). Part of the challenge in school here, (is) that you wouldn't face out in the workplace. You do have deadlines to meet sometimes that gosh, I wish it was next week (later date for completion). It's a learning experience.

> I know exactly what my class schedule will be from now until the day I graduate. There's absolutely no question about it. I like to think about it as the closest thing you could come to education, without having to think. You do have to think very hard for class, but you don't have to think of anything else. It enabled me to see the light at the end of the tunnel and that's what I like about it.

In a recent dissertation on adult persistence in accelerated degree programs, Root noted that adults reported the following strategies for success: 1) highly detailed degree plans, 2) structured daily lives, 3) prioritization for use of limited time, 4) unstinting class preparation, and 5) adoption of coping attitude expressed in the phrase, "I can do anything for five weeks." Through the elements of time, mattering, and psychosocial commitments and rewards, he presented a substantive theory of academic momentum suggesting a combination of forward

movement toward a goal across time and space and motive forces for continued movement against inertia and ambient resistant forces (Root, 1999, December). Adults in this current study also felt that the accelerated degree structure and process provided a momentum, a push towards completion. These adults believed that the structures and process of the program were a type of "velcro experience" that held adults into an environment that supported their making progress and propelling them to completion.

When asked to describe valued elements of the program structure, these adults noted the beliefs that: 1) learning was easier when it focused upon real world experiences and real world applications, 2) small classes and active participation made a difference to keep them alert and involved; 3) learning one subject at a time was an important asset of an accelerated learning experience so there was not a focused overload of learning information; 4) faculty who are practitioners were an asset for an applied degree program because they understood the students and their world, and 5) the structured, predictable, nature of the program removes stress and anxiety. Adults held a strong belief that this program, unlike their previous experiences with other collegiate programs, would help them succeed, as long as they, as individuals, took responsibility in the learning process.

The instructional experiences are supportive, predictable, and relevant. These adults spoke to valuing a predictable, supportive, and relevant instructional focus of their program. This instructional focus targeted faculty who were practitioners, homework related to adult student lives through problem-identification and problem-solving, small classes allowing for everyone to come to know and value everyone, a caring environment of faculty and fellow adult students, and feedback with grades that gave adults a sense of accomplishment. Adults believed that this instructional focus was valued and important to them as adult learners.

> So I feel like I have also achieved a higher level of thinking or something or introspect or something. I feel more in tune with myself and I feel better about the people around me. I have had this kind of support which is really a nice thing to have...and those people who are pushing for you are all going through the same thing.

They also valued the program because of its orientation to real world knowledge and application, of supportive faculty who were practitioners in the work world and who cared about their learning, and to the integration of experiential and active learning through students' life experiences. Lastly, they valued the customized nature of the program and related services (delivered course books, responsive administrators to student issues, ongoing advisement assistance) directed to working adults. As one person called it, "It's a one-stop shop. You don't have to think about anything, but being a student."

Strong bonding and support of fellow students in a learning community. There was a belief of strong bonding and support of fellow students through both a designated student cohort program of 12 to 17 students and within class student project groups of 4 to 5 individuals throughout the program. This structure of the program focused upon creating a learning community through these student cohorts, special class project groups, and integration of student lives within the learning process. Many found their fellow classmates to be a pivotal support as a team working to be successful in the program. They saw that this program purposefully structured this valuable learning community.

> The group is a positive force because the group demands that you do your homework. It's not a matter of you just letting yourself down, your letting other people down that your responsible to. I have a real strong sense of responsibility.

> They really encourage team building. They force you to be in the team. They call if a study groups, but to me it's a team. …And it's an encouragement…If I get stuck on a problem, I know I can call one of my study group people and sometimes I did that.

And as will be noted in the next major theme, students also saw these fellow students as quasi-family support for the intense personal issues faced related to work and family.

Support of fellow students as a family

Adult students noted the importance of their fellow students who came from work, families, and community responsibilities and who also participated in a time-compressed and demanding curriculum. These fellow students were pivotal supports and enhancers of their learning and engagement in the classroom and in their class project groups. Beyond the feature of a "learning community" with their fellow students, these students valued their fellow adult learners as key personal supporters to help them learn and cope with the complexities of their lives. They became a quasi-family of caring and supporting adults faced with adult life demands that were sometimes beyond their level of resilience.

> And over time they become your support group and you learn to talk about your fears and your problems and anything that you are having difficulty with in school, as well as out of school with this group of people. And they help you work through things.

> Another positive is, under this particular program, when you're in with a group that basically has the same goals as you; they're all mature adults; you develop relationships, friendships.

All of the individuals believed that their close relationships, facilitated by the program were a pivotal support and provided them the emotional understanding to handle life's challenges. " We have been through each others' pains, personal problems, plus school problems; so, it's almost like a family." These students felt that their survival and success was in part due to the personal community of being with fellow adults in a learning experience. Most of these adults presented key crises, tragedies, or personal difficulties leading to concerns of continuing in the program. These adult students provided key counseling, advisement, and emotional support for these adults to continue in the program, to cope with their personal life problems, and to identify ways to make their complex lives work with the demands of the degree program.

Beyond the discussion from Root's findings of "mattering" based within an adult degree program (Root, 1999, December), these individuals suggests that they found key sustenance and survival through their close relationships with their fellow adults. This finding is important

because it suggests that in addition to focusing upon a learning community for "learning," these individuals fundamentally were able to succeed based upon the support and intense friendships of their classmates beyond the classroom.

Successful adult students are dedicated, motivation, and responsible

These adult students in this accelerated degree program believed that adult student succeeded because they expressed specific qualities of motivation, dedication, and responsibility. These qualities made the difference. They looked to others in the program and believed that those that took learning seriously (representing these qualities) represented the necessary ethos of student commitment for this program. (Curiously, they also noted a few students who were just there for the credential and were considered an irritant to their involvement and the program. However, these students defined the credential-only adult as a weaker student who was not as dedicated, motivated, and responsible.)

Commitment to the college learning experience. These notions of dedicated, motivation and responsibility of students were implicitly based in the commitment to an "adult" college learning experience.

> These folks going at night aren't kids [comparing to an undergraduate youth-oriented program]. They've got a reason to be there, and I would venture to guess that by and large they are much better students academically; just because they been around more and learned more through life. And I don't think you would really appreciate being in a classroom full of people that didn't want to be there.

> I feel that we're more dedicated. We really want what we're going after because we're willing to sacrifice a whole lot more than the traditional students.

Identifying the dedicated: "Not all who want it, can do it." Adults in this adult degree program suggested that there was a process for identifying the dedicated student. They noted a period of adjustment requiring the development of a set of different learning strategies and attitudes to handle the special demands of the learning and for demonstrating one's competence to do the program. Most believed that this adjustment happened usually between the

first course and the end of the second course (5 to 10 weeks into the program). If select adult students couldn't adjust to the demands of the coursework and couldn't learn how to handle the accelerated learning classroom, they dropped out by the end of the second course.

In addition, this identification process occurred in relation to program option to pursue the development of a portfolio of academically equivalent life experiences for credit. For students who desired this option, they would have pursued the specialized activities and written analytic work also during this time period. Some of the interviewed adult students believed that this process demonstrated the demands and difficulties of producing this portfolio for review. Select adults dropped out from the program upon discovering this complexity and the related additional demands to produce the portfolio.

In describing this adjustment period, they believed that adult students had to change life routines and renegotiate life roles to compensate for the intensive participation. Usually these changes and negotiations occurred with family roles and demands (with concomitant feelings of guilt, neglect, and lost opportunities) and also with elimination of personal time.

> So there is a lot of support from other students. This happened really in the first two classes (courses) we had. There were a lot of people unsure about how this all was going to be, maybe they wanted to drop out, maybe they don't feel like they can do it. There was a lot of support there [for] them. It's not important for me; I don't need the support. But I do see it."

> It's a fourteen month program, or fifteen month; (It's) very, very rapid; everything is fast paced. Getting my life organized around this program; that was a big factor, I mean even right down to grocery shopping. I even had to change that schedule. And now - all of a sudden - you no longer do your chores whenever you want to; you have to do them around the class…You jump right into it - head first. You're just going full speed ahead from the first class. [talks about a traditional program]…But starting this program, it just comes right in at once and it was very confusing, a lot of information real fast. And it's a lot to absorb, a lot to comprehend. So probably for the first month, I was really confused. But as time progressed, you get your feet on the ground, and you

understand how the system works. You become more comfortable and go from there.

A privileged status. These adults reflected several paradoxical issues about their particular life status in relation to their involvement, dedication, and motivation. They believed that their dedication and the program's structure were the key influencers for success. But they also noted that they were "different." They felt unique: 1) because they had a work situation providing tuition remission (because of the high tuition costs), 2) because of family support to let them spend all of their time with school, and 3) because of their own desire to "get the degree." However, they also noted concern for a few fellow students who only wanted the degree, and how they were wasting a space for someone else who "deserved" the degree. They expressed concerned for other adults who couldn't afford the high costs of the program and therefore couldn't participate. They felt uncomfortable in this elitist position of access. Some adults valued getting the degree and attaining that elusive college degree as a new privileged status within their work roles. For example, one adult student noted her exclusion from certain discussions with co-workers who all held college degrees. She believed that she would become their equal with that collegiate degree. Another subtheme came from a group of adults who felt a special paradox of getting the college degree-- of being privileged, but also 'not privileged.' These individuals selected the program because it was their "only option" to quickly complete an undergraduate degree and attaining an important qualification for their work environment. However, the degree major was not their real choice; they spoke wistfully about pursuing their preferred degree (often engineering or computer science). Most had made major attempts to pursue that specialized, technical degree at other institutions and faced significant discrimination based in class scheduling (typically during daytime hours) or based in their full-time work responsibilities in relation to pursuing the degree.

Adult paradoxical beliefs about learning in an accelerated degree

Adult students in this compressed and intensified learning format expressed paradoxical beliefs about learning. They valued the applied and predictable focus of the courses, yet at times desired choice and exploration of other content beyond the confines of the program. They

valued the accelerated nature of the program, yet reported facing stress and anxiety about their involvement, trying to be the "perfect student," and coping with the demands of their work, family, and children's needs. Lastly, they valued their commitment to this unique program, but were concerned about some individual's perceptions they were enrolled in a diploma mill, a "fluff degree." The very nature of the program they valued and its helpfulness to success was questioned by others as being deficient and with no standards and equivalency to other college degrees.

Valuing the practical and applied orientation of the learning. When discussing their learning experiences, they continually noted the value of the practical, applied, work-based learning outcomes of the courses and the program. Most believed that the anchoring of their learning in the work world made their involvement most relevant, exciting, and important. While all noted the importance of learning that could be applied to their specific "real world," a few also noted the importance of class discussions of diverse ways of looking at the content. They valued classmates from varied types of work environments. When engaged in discussions of applications of the theory and content, they believed they learned about the important judgements and understandings necessary to both apply and critique this knowledge across diverse work cultures and operations. These understandings came through the andragogical efforts of course instructors engaging adult students in speaking to their work contexts. These adults also expressed a paradoxical concern of desiring other types of topics and courses. They valued the lockstep, applied program, yet they also recognized that their learning needs and interests would not necessarily be met within this prescriptive, applied curriculum.

Coping with the pace and demands of accelerated learning. These adult students desired to actively engage and learn all that should be learned, while facing the dramatic pace and demand of quickly moving through each course and the program.
They spoke about a variety of concerns in this coping process. They spoke to being overwhelmed with the intensity and of creating a belief system to remove feelings of guilt. They also noted a belief structure that the accelerated degree was the best answer, given their older age.

Most students noted that at many times the intensity of the experience was too much. Many of the adults believed that the time-compressed nature of the program was sometimes overwhelming. Some suggest a lengthened period of time for each course to lessen the demands.

> It is almost too intensive…Its really demanding, so I guess I would look at that and see if maybe, some of the six week courses should be eight week courses or something. And perhaps instead of a fifteen-month degree, it might need to be sixteen or seventeen months, cause it really gets stressful.

> It's so fast--it's such a fast pace that you don't really have the time to detach yourself…. We had a paper due in this week (speaking to the start of a new course)…so you don't have time to stand back (and relax). You're in there one hundred percent.

Along with the demands of great stress and intensity, these adults also believed that because of their age and getting older, that they didn't have the time to spend on a traditional degree program. So, they valued the accelerated program, because it represented a reduction of years of college involvement and years of waiting to have the college degree for their work stability or career progression.

> I didn't feel like I had that time frame to work in (for a traditional length of a college program), because I was getting older. And when you get older, your options aren't available because of your age… I wanted to be as prepared as I could be at that time… The accelerated program is the biggest plus.

Most of the adult students report their efforts to keep up with the demands of the courses by creating a special belief system surrounding the demands of the program. They suggested that they made specific mental compromises between covering all of the content and knowledge, versus selectively learning to keep up with the classes, papers, and exams.

> With the accelerated class, I feel like I'm missing some stuff. And it's not the school's faculty; they make an assignment, and may be-- I don't get it done. But if I had more time, maybe I could... Again, you've got so much you have to cover, maybe the negative part of an accelerated class is you just don't learn all that you want to learn just because of the time constraints and all...It's a lot of work in a short period of time.

One individual noted the difficulty of doing all the required coursework, reporting that "as time progressed, you get your feet on the ground, and you understand how the system works." The 'system' for this individual and select other students was to partially spread out the assignments within the student project group. No one did all of the reading and work; they figured out a way to teach each other and also do the assignments as a collective learning group.

Most of these adult students spoke about trying to be the best that they could be in their student roles. Most of these adults recognized that because of the time compression, the program demands, as well as their own life demands, that they needed to think differently about being a perfect student. "And I know that there's a lot of people who suffer in our class, thinking that they've got to be the best in everything...And they don't recognize that they don't. You strive to be the best, but it's not necessary that your are." As these adults considered the experience of learning in the classroom and making acceptable grades, they reported their desires of perfection ameliorated with the pressures and frustration at not having the leisure to learn all that they wanted to learn. They also noted their concern of missing some important information because of the time compression. They placed a heavy reliance on instructors' who should make sure they were aware of these pressures and learned the important things. Thus, they suggested a mental negotiation of desires, needs, and demands in relation to learning the course content.

As they reflected on the experience of learning in the classroom and making acceptable grades, they noted the problems of: 1) high stress in their lives that also created difficulties in handling the heavy demands of studying, researching, writing papers, and study for tests; 2) changing life routines to accommodate demands of classes;

3) dilemmas of renegotiating family and personal involvements to have enough time for program; and 3) dealing with the mental and physical demands of accelerated work and its fast pace in relation to themselves (of recognizing that their lives were out of balance).

Coping with family responsibilities in relation to accelerated learning. In addition these students continually noted their conflicting efforts to cope with the intensity of the program in relation to their family commitments. Feeling tired and guilty, they often noted the paradox of the program's intense pressure with their own intense conflicting commitments to spend time with family, spouses, and of losing time with growing children. (Curiously, work related issues of intensity were rarely identified.)

> At this point, I'm not sure, how I would make the call. When you take 3 years away from your kids and 3 years away from your wife; and it's a big price to pay. I didn't realize it when I started what price I was going to pay.

Coping with other people's perceptions of the program as a diploma mill. A number of the adult students noted concern about other people's perceptions of the nature of the accelerated degree program. They reported that some of their family and work colleagues believed that they were in a simple and undemanding program; that they were participating in a "diploma mill, a fluff degree." Thus, many were adamant that their degree was as important and as significant as other college degrees; they were just as competent as those who had a different degree. Some believed that their degree was more significant, because it focused on real world issues and applications. They believed that their years of work experience enhanced their learning and understanding for meaningful learning and meaningful use. Although they were participating in an intensive, nontraditional program, they wished that their colleagues and friends could experience the demands and complexities of the program and of their learning. They believed that their family and colleagues' judgements were unfounded and demeaning. Yet they felt helpless in determining ways to gain the respect and understanding from these individuals.

SITUATED LEARNING WITHIN AN ACCELERATED DEGREE PROGRAM

How can we come to understanding the interrelationships of meaning structures of adult learning experiences embedded within a highly stylized and unique context of an accelerated degree program? The theory of situated learning, as presented by Lave and Wenger, provides a helpful backdrop for exploring these beliefs and understandings of the individual adult learner in relation to complex social and cultural environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger suggest that learning is social participation in relation to communities of practice. Thus, the learner's ability to experience and learn in the world is ultimately "engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities (Wenger, 1998, p.7)." As Wenger suggests:

> We all belong to communities of practice. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies--we belong to several communities of practice at any given time. And the communities of practice to which we belong change over the course of our lives. In fact, communities of practice are everywhere--integral part of our daily lives. They are so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus, but for the same reasons they are also quite familiar (Wenger, 1998, pp. 6-7).

> A community of practice …enters into the experience of participants through their very engagement. (The dimensions of practice as the property of a community include:) mutual engagement, a joint enterprise with mutual accountability, and a shared repertoire. (These) create a context for the negotiation of meaning. (Wenger, pp. 72-73, 84)

For this case study, adult students in an accelerated degree program presented a complex number of communities of practice. Within their student role, they had the program culture, the cohort culture, and the class project group each representing variations of communities of practice. In addition, they brought past understandings and beliefs of previous collegiate experiences with one to four prior enrollments in diverse institutions, each reflecting additional communities of

practice and meaning structures. In a second realm—the work world, many adults also spoke to their work role as reflecting two communities of practice: one community was their traditional work role and the second community was often a group of colleagues who had been students either of the program or a similar management program who provided mentoring and assistance in their learning efforts. A third realm reflected family and significant others in a variety of communities of practice to include: spouse (or significant other), children, siblings, and parents, as well as close friends and community/church based friends.

Each of these communities both established meanings that were reified beliefs and expectations (espoused tacit beliefs of structures of meaning and action), as well as provided participation in creation of new understandings and ultimately the "negotiation of meaning." Our engagement in practice has tacit patterns and beliefs, but it is the production of such patterns anew, of the negotiation of meaning that give rise to our experience. "Negotiated meaning is at once both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique (Wenger, 1998, p. 54)." Thus, meaning is never static and objective; it is continually negotiated and renegotiated through the dynamics relationships of living and acting in this world. Meaning is participation that goes beyond the direct engagement in specific activities with specific people. It places the negotiation of meaning in the context of our forms of membership in various communities. It is a constituent of our identities and the social character of our experiences. Thus, the experiences of an adult in an accelerated degree program cannot be comparable to experiences in a daytime, full-time experience of a traditional degree program. It is not only the differences of format and potentially of course content; it is the confluence of the particular individuals attracted to a unique context and their other communities of practice that directly impact their experiences and their negotiation of meanings.

Program Context and Adult Lives: A Unique Cultural Context

The adult learning experience of an accelerated degree program occurred through active participation in community of practices. Adult meanings in this program were clearly created through the specific design elements and explicit culture of this accelerated degree program. In addition, these adult learners brought prior beliefs and experiences from previous communities of practice (community colleges, universities, and colleges) to further delineate and understand this cultural context. As noted by Eraut, "ideas become clarified and personalized during use;

and have only limited meaning prior to use. The context of use affects the way an idea is understood (Eraut, 1985, p.117)" For these adults, the "context" of their lives and its relationships to their learning, influenced how and what they learned in this program context.

The program context and its design elements provided the perceived successful context. The adult-focus of the program incorporated a targeted enrollment to working adults, as well as focused on applied learning to the work context, use of practitioner faculty, lockstep curricula with set days of week for classes, accessible hours and program site, use of cohort model for student enrollment, as well as student project groups (with expectation for learning community). All were important context cultural elements. These features were often understood in personal negotiation of meaning as contrasted to prior experiences (typically negative experiences) by the adult students in other collegiate settings. In addition, these individuals noted the access, the "customized" supports, and related relationships. They continually noted the lack of hassles related to registration, parking, books, and advisement.

The key learning expectations were also established within this community of practice. Clearly, there were rituals and feedback to student socialization in an accelerated learning experience. Students noted key student behavior expectations and, if not met, student exit from the program. [There was a paradoxical lack of consistent understanding related to students who valued only the certification, as opposed to being achievers in classroom learning.] For Wenger, this stance represented a reification of successful student attributes. Adult students believed that those who would be successful would be dedicated, motivated, and academically successful.

One unique cultural understanding was the belief that the nature of the program would "push them to successful completion." Unlike other program context studies in the original research examination of universities, communities, and another adult degree program based in an evening school model, these students believed that the program was going to get them to completion of the degree. They identified elements of the program that were proactive in keep these adult in the program and pushing towards degree completion.

Handling the pressure of accelerated learning in an accelerated life

These adults were both attracted to the program context because of its accelerated format, yet also felt a sense of stress, anxiety, and suffering because of those very qualities. The

accelerated format was both an attractor to met their needs, yet also additional complexity to their participation in a demanding work of work, family, and community efforts.

Their coping strategies reflected many components. Beyond the community of practice of the program and the learning community of the program cohort established through student involvement within courses, these adults spoke to creating a different community of practice. They suggested that they had experienced a quasi-family community of practice, a community based in psychological support, helping them with deep feelings of guilt, conflict, crisis, depression, and stress. They also negotiated and renegotiated forms of relationships and expectations within their family and potentially church and community friends. They typically did not speak to their work relationships as also part of the negotiation of meanings between themselves as individuals and their role as students.

These adult students also dealt with their own desire for competence in relation to being the ideal student. Most spoke to dealing with ways to compromise, whether on an individual basis or with the class project groups. They discussed these issues because they drew upon their previous collegiate experiences of individual reliance and effort, as well as their own desires to learn it all. They felt that the accelerated degree experience pressed upon their possibilities of being that ideal student.

Viewing themselves in relation to their social world

Wenger identified four theory background elements to situated learning. She suggested that this theory of situated learning was located at the intersection of key intellectual traditions, with one axis reflecting the two poles of theories of social structure and theories of situated experience, and the intersecting axis reflecting the poles of the intellectual traditions of theories of social practice and of theories of identity. Theories of social structure were primarily focused upon institutional norms and rules. They emphasized cultural systems, discourses, and history. Theories of situated experience focused on the everyday existence, improvisation, coordination, and interpersonal choreography, emphasizing agency and intentions. Theories of social practice looked at the production and reproduction of specific ways of engaging with the world, focusing on the everyday activity and real-life situations. Theories of identity were concerned with the social formation of the person, the cultural interpretation of the body, and the creation and use of markers of membership such as rites of passage and social categories(Wenger, 1998). These

four traditions presented a framework to view the adults' perspective of their social world as they pursued an accelerated undergraduate degree.

It is evident that these adult students reflected upon the *social structures of society* in relation their pursuit of a college degree. They also had expectations of this major commitment to a community of practice and to the broader social world represented in their family and friends who critiqued the quality of this degree program. Clearly, they knew that they were taking a different path from a traditional four-year degree program structure. They justified their actions of participating in an accelerated degree program by reporting the congruence of the program with their adult lives, needs, and work related learnings. They also felt that the accelerated nature of the program was an important and integral aspect of their involvement. They sought a quicker route that was customized and felt that "can do" attitude in dealing with the high time demands of the program.

This degree program was also viewed as part of their *situated experience of everyday existence*. They judged the program, the nature of their involvements, and the interrelationships to meet many of their situated experience of an adult life. There was not only a stated congruence of the program with their lives; they believed that the program was clearly designed to be adult-friendly, to be responsive to adult needs and desires. By the same token this situated experience provided the stress that created difficulties with their participation in the program.

They also viewed their involvement through the realm of *social practice*, believing that the applied management degree program reflected a closer convergence with their cultural world of work and applied learning to their work context. They saw a direct relationship between the coursework and their work competence. They believed that each course developed additional capacity and efficacy in their work life. They particularly spoke to the importance of practitioner faculty, the class-oriented problem-solving and active learning engagement, and lastly the use of the capstone paper as a research paper for their worksite. They believed that this congruence of degree program and their social practice made the program a special experience.

Their *sense of identity* was clearly also anchored to the program and the related set of participatory involvements. They saw this collegiate involvement as more congruent (in contrast to previous collegiate experiences) with their adult lives of self as student, work, family, and community responsibilities. Not only were they affirmed through the program structure of access, flexibility, and support, they saw themselves valued and supported within both a learning

community and within a quasi-family structure. They believed that the program was going to help them succeed, to get the degree in a timely and helpful way. And they saw their learning experiences as creating direct competence in their worlds of work.

Understanding their Sense of Learning

Unlike the descriptions of adult student learning and meaning making at other collegiate sites of the original study, these adults at the accelerated degree program did not speak to working with bifurcated understandings of real world and academic knowledge as they engaged in their course learning (Kasworm, 1997). (These conceptions of knowledge and learning domains has been formally described by a number of theorists (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sternberg, 1986), representing the constructs of practical intelligence, practical thinking, tacit knowledge versus formal cognition, academic knowledge, or theoretical thinking.) Rather these individuals spoke to embracing knowledge that was anchored within their work world (Outside voice) or to working across both theory and applied understandings of practical knowing (Straddling voice). These two dominant voices, to the exclusion of three other voices in the Kasworm, 1997 study could suggest that the differences reflected the nature of the interviewed group, that of junior and senior adult college students in this program, as well as the applied focus of the instruction on management.

What is evident about these adult learning experiences is the dominance or integration of the practical forms of thinking and knowing within an undergraduate learning experience. As they characterized their learning, they noted the importance of the practical and applied orientation of the learning. Thus, these adults saw a direct congruence with their lives and the classroom learning experiences. They interacted with practitioner faculty who were translators and engagers of the theory and content with the practice. These adult students participated in assignments based in case studies, problem identification, and solving within work contexts. In addition, they spoke to their relationships with their fellow students as fellow work colleagues attempting to understand the complexity of the terrains of work and the content applications of the course on those varied work activities.

The adult students' sense of learning was bounded with time parameters of accelerated learning and of the interconnectedness with their adult lives. Thus, they expressed key concerns for coping with the demands and pace of accelerated learning, as well as coping with the family

responsibilities. The first two areas of coping reflected conflicting needs and values faced by these adult learners as they attempted to make their lives create time and space to do a very demanding degree. These pressures were clearly evident throughout their engagement in these situated learning activities. They also desired full approval of their significant and demanding learning, yet saw select significant others disapproving of their choices and felt sometimes unsure of their work in relation to the course expectations. These coping issues reflect very paradoxical involvements between the reality of negotiating their participation and involvement in relation to other parts of their lives. These negotiated understandings reflected one of the important aspects of situated learning; there is potential conflict, guilt, and stress when multiple cultures, multiple communities of practice do not find congruence.

For adults in an accelerated degree program, the experiences of learning were integral to their experiences of living in multiple adult roles, and in multiple communities of practice, as well as negotiating meanings cross these roles and communities within a unique accelerated degree program.

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